

## Historical Note on John Nicholson and the Intractable Gakkhar Chiefs of Lehri

The first Anglo-Sikh war led to the defeat and partial subjugation of the Sikh empire. In the following peace treaties, a British resident was appointed at Lahore assisted by a council of regency to oversee the affairs of the state till the date the underage ruler Maharaja Duleep Singh (1838-1893) achieved his majority. The appointment of the resident and the wide-ranging authority associated with this post effectively passed on the control of the government of the Sikh empire to the British [1].

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Henry Lawrence (1806-1857), a veteran military officer in the service of the East India Company, was appointed as the first British resident at the royal court in Lahore. He assembled a team of very capable young administrators who were tasked to serve as advisors to the native officials in executing the day to day business of the state throughout the territory under the control of the Sikh empire. One of these young administrators was John Nicholson (1822-1857). John Nicholson had earlier participated in a number of campaigns in Afghanistan and on the north-west frontier of the Indian subcontinent as a military officer. In his new assignment as a political officer, he initially served in the recently established princely state of Jammu and Kashmir in 1846 and later on in various other regions of the Punjab including the Pothohar in 1847-49. John Nicholson reverted to his military role during the second Anglo-Sikh war and after its conclusion and subsequent annexation of the Punjab, he was appointed the deputy commissioner of the Rawalpindi district in 1849. He continued to serve in various parts of the present-day Khyber Pakhtunkhwa province until 1857 when he took part in the siege and the eventual storming of Delhi during the Indian rebellion and was killed in action [2].

As assistant to the British resident, John Nicholson was actively engaged in the land revenue settlement of the Pothohar region during the winter of 1847-48. In order to execute his official responsibilities, he had to travel extensively throughout the areas that now form a part of the Attock, Rawalpindi, Jhelum, and the Chakwal districts. On one such assignment, while he had set up his camp office at the village Bewal (Gujar Khan), he was informed by the Sikh revenue collector (Kardar) of the parganah of Rohtas that lately he has faced great difficulty in managing the affairs of 'Leree' and the state exercises little or no authority over the residents of this particular area. John Nicholson has identified 'Leree' as a small tappa of 13 villages in the Rohtas ilaqa in his official diary [3]. The area being identified as 'Leree' refers to the present-day village of Lehri and its neighborhood that was recognized as one of the chief seats or mother villages (mandis) of the Iskandral sept of the Gakkhars in the Jhelum district prior to and during the British rule [4, 5]. The village is now situated in the Sohawa tehsil of the Jhelum district.

Besides the principal village Lehri, there were many other allied villages of various sizes that formed a part of this so called mandi [6].

John Nicholson arrived at the modern day town of Kala Gujran (Jhelum) during the second half of the month of January in 1848 and summoned the Gakkhar chiefs of the Lehri area notwithstanding the negative opinion of his Sikh associates about this undertaking. Surprisingly, the chiefs who were reputed to have no respect for authority put their house in order and obeyed the summons. The interaction must have been an open and honest one as John Nicholson later recorded in his official diary that the Gakkhar chiefs were undoubtedly turbulent and independent minded however their circumstances were far from ideal and played a key role in defining their unruly behavior. Earlier, about one-third of those among the population of the Lehri area who could bear arms were employed by various functionaries of the Sikh empire but the recent political upheavals have rendered them jobless [7, 8]. These unemployed men resorted to all sorts of adventures causing trouble far and beyond the limits of their own territory. Some of these disaffected men even crossed the river Jhelum and attacked the Mangla fort and at least one person was wounded as a result of the musket fire directed at the fort. The fort was situated in the territory of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. Maharaja Gulab Singh, the incumbent ruler, was an ally of the British and this incident would have been a cause of considerable alarm for all concerned. Interestingly, Maharaja Gulab Singh has been reported to have on an earlier occasion visited the village Lehri and ascended a certain hillock to survey the area [5, 9]. This event most likely took place when the Maharaja used to serve the Sikh empire as a high ranking state official.

John Nicholson himself marched to the village Lehri on 29<sup>th</sup> January, 1848. He has candidly recorded the difficulty the pack animals faced while proceeding to Lehri as the passage was rendered much more arduous due to the inclement weather. For the next two days, he was engaged in settling the affairs of the land revenue of the area coupled with an effort to put a check on the prevailing law and order situation [3]. Apparently, the Gakkhar chiefs of Lehri only paid nominal rents as land revenue during the Sikh rule and this practice was carried on in the latest settlement. The intended objective of this generous treatment was to express the goodwill of the state and to win over the loyalty and trust of the Gakkhar chiefs.

During the second Anglo-Sikh war, the Gakkhars of Lehri generally supported the Sikhs and at least one of the chiefs with his contingent of troops participated in the battle of Chillianwala on 13<sup>th</sup> January, 1849 [9]. After the war, it was decided by the British authorities to disarm the residents of those areas that have taken an active part in the military operations at the behest of the Sikhs. The Gakkhars of Lehri who had stopped the payment of government dues probably even before the war, stubbornly refused to surrender their arms. This persistent rebellious and

obstinate attitude coupled with the general inaccessibility of the Lehri area became a source of great concern for the British political officers posted in the Jhelum region [5]. John Nicholson decided to take punitive measures against the Gakkhar chiefs of Lehri whose conduct as he saw it amounted to a travesty of the authority of the state. A police action was planned directed against the residents of the most troublesome villages of Lehri and Gadari. The village Gadari is located to the north-east of Lehri and the residents are of by and large the same stock as Lehri.

A contingent of 250 horsemen and foot soldiers under the command of a Sikh officer was dispatched to the Lehri area on 8<sup>th</sup> April, 1849 to search and confiscate arms. The operation was successful and about 200 different weapons were recovered. Some houses were also set ablaze at Lehri as punishment for not surrendering these weapons earlier. In order to avoid the surrender of arms, a few individuals managed to escape to the Mirpur-Chaomukh area across the river Jhelum into the territory of the state of Jammu and Kashmir. A section of troops was stationed at Lehri for show of force and to collect the remaining weapons. It was further decided that henceforth the settlement of the land revenue of the Lehri area will not be light and the Gakkhars chiefs will be taught a stern lesson for their unyielding behavior by cancelation of leases and turning over of their estates to the Jat cultivators. The disarming of the residents of Lehri area continued during the week following the police action and a further 600 weapons were confiscated [3].

Raja Muhammad Yaqub Tariq, the well known translator of the Gakkhar chronicle Kaigoharnama noted in the 1956 edition of his book that the village Lehri was set to fire by the Sikhs on two instants. Apparently, this assertion was made without any historical evidence and later removed from the 1996 edition of the same book [9, 10]. For many years after the establishment of the Sikh empire, the Gakkhars of the Lehri area resisted submitting to the authority of the Maharaja Ranjit Singh (1780-1839). The Gakkhar chief of Lehri Sardar Fateh Din Khan on multiple occasions assisted Raja Nur Khan, the Gakkhar Chief of the village Domeli (Sohawa), in his conflicts with the Sikh administrators of the parganah of Rohtas. In order to put an end to these incursions and to subdue the Gakkhars of the Lehri area, the Sikhs launched an attack and a battle took place a few miles south-east of the village Lehri. In this military engagement, the Gakkhars led by Sardar Fateh Din Khan were defeated and their territory finally subjugated [6, 9]. After their victory, the Sikhs generally treated the Gakkhars well and offered to form an alliance, which lasted till the end of the Sikh empire. As noted in the preceding paragraphs, a considerable part of the population fit for military service was drafted into the ranks of the irregular forces maintained by the Sikh chiefs. In consequence of the military service offered by the Gakkhars, they received handsome compensation and were only charged nominal rents for their estates [3, 7]. The only recorded instance when property was

set ablaze in the village Lehri as retribution for defying a government proclamation was on the orders of John Nicholson.

## References

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